



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Citizenship

‘Reaping the benefits of integration in a dispersed organisation’

Address to the 2009 Government Business Conference

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen.

While I very much enjoy my work in Canberra, I’m always pleased to have the opportunity to visit staff in our other offices, such as here in Sydney in the CBD offices and in Parramatta. And my organisation is truly global, with 7000 staff; including almost 1000 overseas.

When I do travel, I’m very aware that nearly two thirds of APS employees work outside Canberra and undertake the crucial roles of implementing and delivering programs in their region and engaging with their local communities.

I have had two long periods working in state offices. I remember well the feeling as missives from Canberra would lob in from time to time and we would set about adjusting the instructions to the reality of our local environment. Sometimes, as relatively junior officers, we would wonder if the person who had drafted or authorised the instruction really understood what we were doing or the environment we were working in!

I spent a few years as the Deputy State Director in Victoria and then worked overseas as the Regional Migration Director in Hong Kong. They were both excellent opportunities to explore how to lead busy operational offices, where things do not always go according to plan and creative local solutions need to be employed from time to time.

Nowadays, as Secretary of DIAC, it’s important that I keep in touch with our 100 or so state, territory and overseas offices. I’m invariably impressed at how strongly involved my staff are in achieving the purpose of the department to manage the entry and settlement of people and how effectively they work in collaboration with their colleagues across the organisation.

The themes of this conference—innovation and leadership—are of course just as relevant and in many ways more relevant for my staff in Beijing, Bangkok, Christmas Island or Cairns, as in Canberra. In terms of innovation, each of our state, territory and overseas offices is like a little laboratory where people use their creativity and ingenuity to manage a range of issues with limited resources. Leadership, I’ll discuss in a moment.

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I was interested to read a recent article by Public Service Commissioner Lynelle Briggs¹ on the devolution reforms of recent decades in the APS which saw ‘a move away from centralised, hierarchical, command-and-control employment and human resource management models towards devolved, managerial approaches more akin to the private sector’.

She noted Australia is one of the top three OECD countries for delegated management of the public service and that ‘OECD countries have found, as we have, a risk that closer alignment with private sector practices may undermine traditional public service values, unless compensating measures are taken to support core values’.

This is very relevant to me, as four years ago, my department faced a very uncertain future and one of the ways of looking at this, was that despite the very different roles of staff and their dispersal across the globe, we were not working together as an integrated team. Within the umbrella that was then the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, devolution of responsibility had encouraged the development of several different sub-organisations each with its own slightly different approach and staff culture, broadly united by their membership of the department.

I won’t claim the work of DIAC is more diverse than any other portfolio but there are some very different roles and skill-sets across the organisation. Organising a visit to a factory suspected of having unlawful immigrants on the payroll takes a different set of skills to preparing a Cabinet submission on the size of next year’s migration program, and is different again to engaging with a long line of potential migrants in Washington or Warsaw.

And then we ask our compliance teams, as we call them, to be filmed as they make visits or staff the airports and seaports, and then have the results shown on national television in the program ‘Border Security’—a ratings winner in its prime-time spot on Sunday nights.

One way of looking at my task when I rejoined the department, as secretary, in July 2005 was that we needed to build an integrated department, united by our common nation-building purpose, sharing a common culture based on the APS values and generally understanding where we all fitted into the bigger picture.

The ability to work together in this way is critical in maximising performance.

It’s a bit like a team sport where each player not only has to be performing well as individuals but also needs to be working effectively with their colleagues. Even if you are scoring lots of goals because your forward players are very good, you can still lose the match if your own goal is not well defended.

It’s not just about individual performance in defined business units either, such as managing the skilled migration program or managing an immigration detention centre. A highly effective organisation can synthesise the expertise and insights from the different business units and teams to develop proposals and responses that lie outside the boundaries of current activity. Importantly, a unified organisation can also develop the critical capability of looking forward and anticipating changes in the strategic and operating environment.

I believe that one of the strengths of my department is that we can draw on our collective wisdom in these ways.

Getting to this point where we can collectively look forward and respond effectively to change was a considerable challenge.

¹ “Australia’s civil service the world’s best”, Lynelle Briggs, Public Service Commissioner, Canberra Times, 7 April 2009

Integrating our leadership across our functionally and geographically diverse organisation was crucial to this ability.

To build and develop our collective leadership capability, I convene regular SES forums where we discuss and plan the department's future. I write to senior leaders once a week about current issues and their leadership and I meet with each SES officer individually at least once per year. My deputy secretaries and I work together fairly intensively at times to ensure we are offering unified and effective leadership.

I also formed an Executive Committee of senior leaders which brings all major resourcing and other strategic decisions into a single accountable forum. This provides consistency in decision-making and allows us to compare and prioritise our activities across the department. I fully recognise each of my SES managers faces different demands and has a different personality and approach to bring to bear on their work. I also encourage them to be innovative in the way they use their resources. The Executive Committee gives the senior leadership team of the department the tool to know what is going on and to offer broad guidance and direction that can empower local managers to respond effectively to local circumstances.

It's also critical that we have a steady stream of senior leaders arriving from other agencies or with other experiences. Our outside recruits offer innovative ideas and fresh thinking in how we can work more effectively. And the people coming from other public sector agencies exert a normative effect to ensure we do not become so immersed in the immigration and citizenship function that we separate from the mainstream of the public sector.

I recently appointed our first Chief Economist, Mark Cully, from academia, to build our evidence base and advise on the economic aspects of the migration program. As it turned out this was a prescient appointment and Mark has been busy as a key advisor on managing our response to the economic downturn, such as through running some extremely popular information sessions for staff.

At the Executive Level and below, we identified essential leadership behaviours and instituted residential leadership programs for Executive Level staff. I also introduced the concept that all our staff needed to show appropriate leadership behaviour irrespective of whether they are managing a branch in National Office, managing an IT project, or indeed, serving on the front counter at the Parramatta office.

Nevertheless, leadership is just one element of our path to being an integrated organisation—a crucially important element of course.

The other theme of this conference is innovation.

To capture some of the innovation that occurs in our service delivery network I have instituted awards to celebrate and share our successes including the annual Secretary's Client Service Challenge for teams and the monthly Award for Client Service Excellence for individuals.

We also have dedicated units monitoring performance in our state, territory and overseas offices and examining how we can improve. The online Visa and Citizenship Wizards are an example of innovation offering an interactive, client self-service tool to provide prospective travellers and migrants with tailored information about their visa and citizenship options. This new online capability means clients have easier access to clear and consistent information, 24 hours a day, right around the world.

I am pleased these Wizards have been short-listed for the 'Excellence in e-Government Award' hosted by the Australian Government Management Information Office and to be announced in a few days time.

Last year, the minister asked us to build the broader evidence base in our portfolio and as well as appointing the Chief Economist, I established a Policy Innovation and Research Unit. This unit reports directly to me and is increasingly promoting a department-wide culture of evidence-based research to underpin policy settings and our forward thinking and planning.

It's relatively early days yet for this unit, but it is essential to support our ability in the longer term of promoting a culture of critical thinking and a debate of ideas across the organisation.

There's a balance required here too in deciding what is true innovation and what is the very necessary task of implementing best-practice tailored to your own circumstances.

In recent years, we have developed a good reputation in our region for our abilities in border security, including specialised technical expertise in biometrics and document examination, with the latter particularly being drawn on by countries in our region.

And a few years ago, the United Kingdom picked up our points-based system where we choose the skilled migrants Australia needs on the basis of their capabilities.

A very large component of our integrated ability is now coming from the *Systems for People* program—an information technology blueprint to improve departmental performance through the redesign of business processes, better management use of information and modern technological support.

This is one of the largest technology-enabled business transformations the public sector in Australia has undertaken. Every one of our 7000 staff has been—or will be—affected by this transformation which gives our staff common portals and views of clients wherever they are in the world. So there is a common border security portal, a client search portal, compliance, case management, and detention portals and so on. This has brought together key aspects of our day-to-day work in processing and deciding visas and has been a powerful means of integrating our work.

Our service delivery staff across the world have been key participants in testing and fine-tuning the systems and I really can't overestimate the importance of this project in enabling our business, but also in bringing our staff across the globe together to work as a team.

Unified business and financial planning has been an important driver of integrated activity, including the activities of the Executive Committee I mentioned earlier.

We have cascading business planning through business units and divisions and right down to the sectional and even personal work plans for each staff member, developed against an improved performance and development process.

Consistent and effective training was also a key element of giving our staff a common base and understanding from which to work and interact. A two day induction course is mandatory and we have a variety of leadership and cultural programs as well as specific programs through the College of Immigration for people working in the difficult compliance, detention and case management areas. The training is also an important baseline from which we can develop a shared narrative for our internal communication on how the department is travelling and where we are going.

I send a twice weekly message to all staff in which I pull together the overview of what is happening in the department and present important issues for discussion. Recently, I used the message to ask for feedback on our draft strategic plan for next year and asked all staff to vote on a change to our purpose statement. All this helps to engender the view that staff are part of a single team working towards a common goal.

The last area I would like to mention is that of stakeholder engagement and external communication. We had very good relations with some of our stakeholders five years ago, and you may recall, not very good relations with others. We brought the function together and really thought hard about how we would work to improve the way we work with all stakeholders. This has been very successful. Along with a revamp of our media and communication area we are now delivering consistent messages to stakeholders and acting on their concerns.

There are a number of examples I could offer to illustrate the success of this ongoing program of business and cultural transformation. Probably the most significant from my perspective is the independent review I commissioned of the department's activities last year by a well-known and well-respected expert in public and private sector administration, Elizabeth Proust.

The review was very positive and a valuable piece of evidence in confirming the department is on track towards our goal of being a high-performing, responsive and forward-looking organisation.

This is a brief sketch of the reform process underway, which has given us an integrated capability and an ability to harness the collective capacity of the department, beyond being a collection of highly performing individual business units. As I mentioned, we can use this integrated capacity to respond flexibly to change that affects the whole organisation such as a new policy direction and to confidently look ahead at how we might position ourselves in a dynamic global and domestic environment.

Let me just return for a moment to the issue of devolution. When the pendulum swung away from centralised control in the public sector towards devolution of responsibility, we could perhaps have anticipated there would be some areas where the relaxation of central controls might leave an organisation vulnerable. With 20/20 hindsight from my own experiences, it's clear that one of those vulnerabilities occurs if an organisation is geographically dispersed as my department is, or if an organisation has some very diverse functions, as we also do.

One of the key lessons for the broader public sector from the reform process in my department over the past four years is the importance of integrating culture, planning and information technology—and the development of a unified leadership team to build a united department and draw out the collective strengths of the organisation.

With that background, I would like to discuss two critical areas where we have reaped the benefits of this integrated capability in recent times—in responding to and implementing the policy agenda of the new government and in responding to the global economic crisis.

The government's agenda

The government's reform agenda has had some wide-ranging implications for the department and has tested our ability to deliver whole-of-department changes in a short time.

There have been key changes in areas such as the arrangements surrounding temporary work visas, the size and eligibility requirements for our migration program, asylum seeker processing, immigration enforcement and detention, the citizenship test and the introduction of the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme; as well as reviews of the registration of migration agents, the Adult Migrant English Program and the Living in Harmony Program.

What I want to mention particularly today are the whole-of-department initiatives where we have been able to quickly implement change and have involved us working together as a team across the globe.

In response to concerns around lengthy processing times for our 457 temporary work visas, three Centres of Excellence to process 457 visas commenced operation on 1 July 2008.

Together with a Backlog Elimination Project, the introduction of service excellence principles, and a revised business model we reduced the backlog from nearly 14 000 visa applications to approximately 6600 in six months. The minister has since announced further changes to the program requiring a range of legislative, operational, systems and other changes, affecting the work of nearly everyone with any responsibility for the 457 visa program. Application levels are now falling, given economic circumstances.

I should also mention the implementation of the eVisitor online service. This is a one-stop shop for citizens of the EU and some other countries wishing to travel to Australia either for tourism or business purposes, and is also a finalist in the e-Government awards. The new service reduced the time and effort needed to apply as well as facilitating faster processing, better information for applicants and incorporating improved immigration and security risk screening.

It's another example of the very valuable capability we now have to undertake large across-the-board projects where we work together in an integrated way across the department so a significant broad outcome is achieved.

The global economic crisis

As we all know, the world is in the grip of an economic crisis not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s and one coming after 17 years of economic growth in Australia, an unusually long period in historical terms.

While Australia has been one of the last countries to be affected, we are exposed to global trade and tourism which is set to contract even further than it already has. We are already seeing company profits fall, with some businesses failing and others transferring jobs overseas.

As a result of the global downturn, we can expect some natural falls in the number of people wanting to migrate here permanently, as well as drops in temporary visa applicants and tourism as we are already seeing.

Our minister has also stated publicly that he expects the size of the skilled migration program to be smaller in 2009-10 as a consequence of decreased demand for labour. Announcements about this will be made soon.

The point of this is that the funding for my department has an activity-based component so we are anticipating our funding will decrease along with our workloads.

Added to this is severe expected falls in overall government tax revenue and a number of government decisions impacting on our budget including the ongoing efficiency dividend, an increase in required savings under the 'Responsible Economic Management' cross-government initiative, and a contribution to the \$400 million IT savings target across government as part of the implementation of the Gershon reforms.

The government has committed to getting the budget back into surplus as quickly as possible and has indicated discretionary spending will need to be offset by savings elsewhere through reprioritisation.

We can safely assume every Australian Government department or agency is under pressure as a result of government decisions resulting from the economic crisis.

I have to say that I would not like to be facing this crisis without the ability to compare and prioritise expenditure across the department through our Executive Committee review processes.

We have been in frequent discussion on this matter in the committee for many months and are able to carefully consider the impact of each savings proposal on every area of our operations.

Next Wednesday, I'll be releasing a video address to all staff which will address the implications of the 2009-10 Budget for our department, including any further savings measures.

Conclusion

It's important that we don't let the global economic crisis paralyse our ability to plan for the future. So as mentioned, I felt it was very important to consult staff and invite their input recently as we formulate the DIAC Strategic Plan for the next three years.

We should also note the nation-building role migration has in our society with around seven million people settling here under the department's planned migration programs since 1945.

Through these programs, migration has been a bedrock of Australia's economic development, and will continue to be so once the economic crisis passes. For example, it's an inevitable consequence of the ageing of the population that our workforce will shrink as baby boomers leave the workforce. A well-managed and appropriately sized migration program will help to attenuate the effects of this population ageing, and will boost living standards as our migrants tend to be younger and better educated than the population at large.

In my department, we need to be ready to use our migration programs to meet skill needs and balance the ageing of the population so that the impacts of the global economic crisis are minimized.

While I know we will have to weather some tough times before we reach this point, I am confident the capability we have developed over the past years to work together in an integrated and responsive way has positioned us well to work through the economic crisis and play our part in assisting Australia's economic recovery.

Thank you.